

How to Lead an Effective Meeting

As a ministry leader, paid or volunteer, you probably lead meetings from time to time. No one likes meetings, but they are necessary on occasion to coordinate the work of a team and make important decisions. If you have ever been in a poorly led meeting, you know how frustrating it can be.

Poorly led meetings exact a cost on the organization. They irritate team members who rightly sense that their time is being wasted. They take energy and resources away from more profitable pursuits. They reflect poorly on the leader, too, undermining team members' confidence in the one who is supposed to be guiding their ministry.

You cannot afford to lead ineffective meetings. Here are some guidelines that will help you have productive meetings that strengthen your ministry and your team. Guidelines one through four are what you do *before* the meeting. Five through 11 are what you do *during* the meeting.

1. *Figure out what the meeting is for.* If you cannot define clearly the purpose of the meeting, you do not need to have one. The first job of leadership is clear communication. Put in writing a clear, succinct purpose statement for the meeting. If the meeting has multiple purposes, define each one. It must be absolutely clear to you, the leader, why you are having a meeting if you want it to be effective.

2. *Design the agenda around the purpose(s).* An agenda should be a step-by-step plan for accomplishing the purpose of a meeting within a set amount of time. It should have a logical flow and lead the group to the point of decision or action. Put the agenda in writing, starting with the purpose statement, and make sure it will lead you to your desired destination.

3. *Distribute the agenda in advance.* Agendas are not top-secret documents! Make sure each team member has the agenda at least a few days in advance. It is beneficial to all participants if they know why you are meeting and what you plan to do in the meeting. Team members will then know what to expect and won't have to worry about being blindsided.

4. *Ask for and expect preparation.* When you distribute the agenda, let participants know what you expect them to be prepared for when they arrive at the meeting. You are doing your meeting prep, so it is appropriate to expect them to prepare, too. Spell it out clearly. Do not require people to read your mind. They have a right to know what you expect if you are going to hold them accountable for it.

5. *Start on time and end on time.* Nothing says "I don't really care about your time" more clearly than to sit around making small talk for the first 15 minutes of a scheduled meeting. This undermines your leadership. Ignoring the scheduled ending time does too. Honor your time commitments to those who look to you for leadership. Respect their busy lives and show them how much you value them. If there are unresolved matters at the end of the meeting, then put them at the top of the agenda for the next meeting.

6. *Guide the meeting to stay on agenda and accomplish the purpose(s).* As the leader of the meeting, you supply the guard rails that keep the meeting from steering off course. I realize this is more art than science. It requires fostering a collegial atmosphere for discussion and sharing viewpoints, but also the understanding that rabbits will not be chased and time-wasters will not be allowed. When a rabbit pops up, it is important for you to say, "That is something we may need to discuss at another time, but let's focus on the specific matter at hand."

7. *Establish the ground rule, "Silence means consent."* Unfortunately, some team members like to undermine the work of the group when the team member does not get his or her way. A common technique for doing this is to remain silent during the team meeting, and then say later, "Well, I didn't really agree with that decision." This is unacceptable behavior. As the leader, you should establish the principle that silence means consent. If a team member does not otherwise speak up, it is reasonable to assume that he or she is on board with the decision. Of course, the assumption is that you have created an atmosphere where it is safe for participants to voice dissent and share their viewpoints openly. If so, then it is appropriate to interpret silence as consent.

8. *Ban distracting devices.* It is reasonable to expect meeting participants to be *completely there* during a meeting. Studies show the mere presence of a mobile device on the meeting table draws attention away from the matter at hand. (The book to read on this subject is Reclaiming Conversation by Sherry Turkle.) Text messages and emails are for another time.

9. *Recap at the end.* As you draw the meeting to a close, review what was decided and any action items resulting from the meeting. Also note any unresolved issues that will be taken up at the next meeting. Be clear and succinct with the recap.

10. *Make assignments and set report-back deadlines.* Flowing out of the recap, make sure it is clear *who is to do what by when* following the meeting. Make sure you, as the leader, follow up on your action items quickly. The meeting will have been wasted time if what was decided does not get implemented in a timely way.

11. *Schedule the next meeting, if necessary.* If not necessary, don't schedule it (see item one above).

Bottom line: Leading a meeting is work for the ministry leader – before, during, and after the meeting. I hope you see that doing the work that makes for an effective meeting will enhance your leadership, the fruitfulness of your ministry, and the strength of your team.